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SUSTAINING
PEACE
PROJECT

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO LIVE IN PEACE?

A REPORT ON LESSONS FROM MAURITIUS

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INTRODUCTION

What does it take to live in peace? How can people from different groups live together without letting differences lead to deep fractures, divides, and violence? How can multicultural societies move from tolerating difference to deep reciprocity, where all not only survive side by side, but also form diverse relationships that help all people to thrive?

These questions lie at the heart of understanding sustainable peace.

We are still far from a robust scientific understanding of answers to these important questions. Scholars rarely study peaceful societies, and when they do, peace is typically approached in terms of the absence of violence, rather than from a more holistic perspective also incorporating what leads to positive intergroup dynamics. To help fill this gap, it is critical to learn from the wisdom of peaceful modern multicultural nations.

International indices have labeled Mauritius the most peaceful nation in Africa and one of the most peaceful multicultural nations on the planet (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2019, 2020). It is the most densely populated country in Africa and is situated about 1000 kilometres east of Madagascar. It was uninhabited until it was colonized successively by the Dutch, French, and British until it became independent in 1968. Mauritius is a secular Republic, with a diverse population constituted of the descendants of slaves, French settlers, Indian and Chinese traders and indentured laborers living together. With the exception of riots in 1999 after the Creole singer Kaya died while in police custody, a death that many saw as racially motivated, the country has remained relatively free from ethnic violence while maintaining a high degree of diversity. As such, Mauritius can offer insights into what drives peace, and into modes of resilience in the face of the challenges and threats to peace that even the most peaceful nations still confront.

This report offers lessons learned from focus groups and

interviews with Mauritians about sustaining peace. As part of a collaboration between the University of Mauritius and Columbia University's Advanced Consortium of Cooperation, Conflict and Complexity, this project is part of a broader initiative, the Sustaining Peace Project, that strives to use interdisciplinary methods to glean insights into sustaining peace globally.

This report includes lessons learned from analyzing the perspectives of people who have been active leaders in promoting peace, and the voices of everyday Mauritians. Interviews were conducted with a variety of prominent stakeholders selected for their expertise in areas such as conflict resolution, government, linguistics, labor relations, colonialism, law, media, and the environment, and included policy-makers, journalists, academics, artists, mediators, community leaders, and activists. We also conducted a series of dialogues, where members of different communities could speak to what they feel the most important drivers and challenges to peace are in Mauritius. Separate sessions were held with members of a Chagos refugee group, the Chinese community, the Creole community, the Franco-Mauritian community, the Hindu community, the Muslim community, LGBTQ groups, Mauritian women, and University of Mauritius students. Most of these group discussions were led by facilitators who were members of the represented communities, which can help allow for more free conversation. As we sought people's honest opinions, names of all participants have been removed to help protect the identities of those included in this study.

These interviews and conversations helped paint a picture of how Mauritians view the current state of peace within the country. Many described an everyday peace- a peace where every person who walked by a woman who had lost her keys in a hole in the pavement stopped to help, regardless of their background; A peace where neighbors bring over little cakes when celebrating their cultural holidays – on Diwali, on Christmas, on Chinese New Year, after sundown on Eid al Fitr; A peace where someone from another community would look out for you when you are both in the hospital, despite historical group



“I think that there is peace when everyone is together, all components of the Mauritian population. We are quiet, we don't fight. We don't foster hatred. We don't judge each other.”

- Focus Group Participant

Focus group facilitators in a workshop debriefing focus groups



prejudices. These ordinary positive day to day connections with others from different backgrounds help highlight the micro-politics of peace, the social fabric that keeps Mauritius a vibrant multicultural society.

Many described a peace with no immediate threat of war, where guns are exceedingly rare, and where even a contested election does not boil over into physical violence. But many also described a tentative peace, a fragile peace where people are “in an inferno, in quicksand” and where “deep down underneath we still have challenges because of this sort of ethnical problem, racism, what you call here, communalism, and following this, a lot of exclusion, discrimination, and of course, poverty and the social ends associated with it.” While Mauritius may not be a utopia, those who participated in this study noted several processes and dynamics that contribute to peace on the island.

10 KEYS TO SUSTAINING PEACE

Interviews and dialogues surfaced several lessons on what participants believe builds and maintains peace within Mauritius. Common themes from the conversations in this study suggest several actionable keys to sustaining peace, listed below in order of the frequency they were mentioned:

1) Transmit Wisdom

By sharing knowledge, values, and stories through formal education, the media, the internet, museums, and storytelling, it is possible to open minds, reduce prejudice, and ensure that the harms of the past are not repeated in the future. Many pointed to how the transmission of knowledge is critical to passing along the wisdom and values necessary for promoting positive peace.

2) Appreciate Le Vivre Ensemble

Participants revealed a deep pride in the diversity of the country, and a set of norms and policies that help support this multiculturalism. Growing up in a diverse society can help develop a set of values and skills needed to live together, and respect for others despite differences can also be maintained through multicultural education and protective laws.

3) Normalize Non-violent, Non-confrontational Values

Social norms and taboos which prohibit the use of violence, and encourage conflict avoidance, self-control and restraint are tactics used in societies around the world to keep the peace. In Mauritius, strong social expectations and even institutionalized regulations privilege peace and interpersonal harmony over discussing potentially controversial and inflammatory issues.

“Conflicts in Mauritius are swept under the carpet

- Focus Group Participant

4) Build Unifying Cross-Cutting Ties

Integrated workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods allow people to build bonds across communities that bridge differences. Though it is not completely accepted, intermarriage in particular was mentioned as a large contributor to peace.



A sign along the side of the road

5) Create an Overarching Identity

Despite the diversity in Mauritius, many pointed to a strong overarching identity as Mauritians. When diverse groups share a common identity, research suggests that people perceive other groups as less threatening, and are more likely to have positive attitudes about those from different groups.

6) Protect the Safety of All People

No guns, no army, and a general respect for the rule of law, made Mauritians across groups feel a sense of security. Though most participants described how they feel safe even walking alone at night, this is not necessarily always true for all groups, particularly for some women and LGBTQ individuals.

7) Develop Peace Within Yourself

Individual qualities such as respect, trust, faith, compassion, and benevolence, were viewed as critical to peace.

“I think that you need first to have inner peace. Then you can make peace with others. If you have peace within yourself, then you can reach out to others.”

- Focus Group Participant

8) Strive for Equity

Many described how ensuring that all groups have equal access to representation, power and resources is an important factor in achieving peace. Many participants described how Mauritius has not achieved this ideal yet, but believe working towards this is key to sustaining peace.

9) Meet Basic Needs

Mauritius has a strong welfare state, serving as a social safety net, ensuring the majority of people have access to basic services such as healthcare, housing, and education. Research suggests having basic needs met like food and shelter serves as a basis for well-being and allows people to thrive. The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how helpful universal healthcare has been in keeping death rates comparatively low.

10) Remember the Past for a Better Future

Participants described how knowledge of past tensions and violence has inspired a fear of future conflict, which works to promote peace. For many who were familiar with past instances of intergroup violence, the fragility of peace is salient, serving as a motivation to avoid escalating any tensions.

“I am thinking about the riots that happened. Everybody who is here lived through it. Nobody wants to go through it again. It is a loss for Mauritius. We learn from a mistake so we refrain from making the same ones.”

- Focus Group Participant



Appravasi Ghat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on an immigration depot that was the entrance for many indentured laborers

CHALLENGES TO PEACE

Participants in our study were also concerned about some pervasive and upcoming challenges to sustainable peace. They acknowledged the need for the adjustment of existing strategies in response to some festering issues such as residual colonial structures. The urgency of developing new processes which would attend to the changing nature of the problems now facing Mauritian society, such as environmental hazards, was also highlighted. Key themes that emerged include in order of frequency mentioned:

Communalism

The primacy of in-group loyalties was considered as a major impediment to the elaboration of common civic objectives foundational to sustainable peace. ‘What we hypocritically hide in Mauritius is that we have communalism to a large extent., I will support my religion in order to exclude you,’ one of the participants confided.

Politics

The cultivation of ethnic distinctiveness is further exacerbated by political maneuvering, especially at election time, according to our informants. Corrupt practices and cronyism which have become endemic in local political culture were identified as social scourges

which require regulation.

Colonial Legacies

The incomplete overhaul of colonial structures continues to have a negative impact on some sections of the population such as the Creole community which has been struggling with persistent barriers. In this context, a stakeholder referred to the Truth and Justice Commission submissions which are in abeyance, "So with this background, for example, one of the recommendations, one of the points we made, is that the Creole community has been left out... at the end of the day, it is the structural constraints... made to always exclude, in the main path of the economic level, and that explains the situation of today."

Inequality

The increasing gap between the rich and the poor was identified as one of the growing forms of structural inequality in society. In particular, participants considered that a discrepant development process has bred disparities in wealth, access to education, political representation, and opportunity, among different groups, with members of the Creole group being more severely disadvantaged.

Precarity

Decades of prosperity in Mauritius have resulted in high levels of consumption which would be unsustainable in the long term and the prospect of an economic downturn, many predicted, (which has eventuated with COVID-19), could result in increasing precarity. Recurrent extreme climatic conditions heighten the economic precarity of those who already live in densely populated areas and who rely on benefits to survive. In fact, participants were collectively alarmed by the potential environmental hazards facing the population of a small island-state like Mauritius.

Image of le Morne by Myroslava via Canva Pro

"[The] real threat is environmental, is climate change... This is the main challenge of our society, more than ethnic conflicts, according to me"

- Interview Participant

Scarcity

Resources and opportunities remain scarce and are not accessible to everyone in the same measure. Our participants deplored the quality of public services despite wider access and emphasized that poorer people have been struggling to live their lives fully.

“The little people, the common people, the laypersons, are really struggling...”

- Interview Participant



Some of the challenges which were evoked by the participants also constituted the peaceful characteristics of Mauritian society, namely the non-confrontational social dynamics of the population and the accommodation of difference:

Cleavages

Numerous participants in the study stated that the homogenization of designated ethnic communities mutes any social discrepancies within ethnic groups as well as intersectional inequality.

Inaction

Failure to address existing and worsening tensions was attributed to what participants labelled as forms of ‘inaction’ or passivity characteristic of a culture of compromise and avoidance. One journalist noted, “If you look at South Africa, for example, their history, they sat and talked about the problems and they moved on. ...But we are not anywhere near being able to do anything like that. We don't talk’

SOURCES OF RESILIENCE

In the face of these challenges, participants also identified several qualities and processes which have helped address issues.

The existence of **cross-cutting structures** and ties in Mauritian society is one of the most significant sources of resilience among the population.

Civil society actors and social activists within and across communities have played a critical role in developing and maintaining conflict resolution strategies.

Cultural awareness across the population helps to manage challenges which might be encountered in living in a multi-ethnic and rapidly changing society. Education in particular helps to bolster the awareness of peaceful cooperation as vital to the very existence of the island nation, and as a cornerstone of national progress.

Effective conflict resolution strategies: People tend to respect and trust the processes of procedural justice and continue to turn towards institutions to fulfill their aspirations for distributive justice.

Keepers of the Peace: A few religious and political leaders as well as groups of women, are actively engaged in containing any onset of violence by cultivating practices of listening, consulting, reflecting, entering into dialogue and bringing together the population around the reciprocity which they live by. One of our informants highlighted that, ‘we have good[people], we have a few of these strong people who want to intervene, and they are respected and they can calm down the situation.’

Individual Resilience Mindset:

Empathy, forgiveness, wisdom and grit are harnessed by locals to address potential interpersonal and intergroup conflicts which might loom in everyday life. Women, in particular, highlighted the ways in which they cultivated empathy as a form of mediation but also, and more importantly, as a springboard for solidarity and community.

“What is important in this, empathy is this keyword which can solve our issues. Empathy is when I try to understand you...Why did you react like this? Why did you throw your pen and go away? I try to understand.”

- Interview Participant

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on our findings from interview and focus group data, we offer the following recommendations:



Mangel Mahadev monument at the entrance of Grand Bassin



Le Morne Brabant, a UNESCO heritage site marking a refuge for escaped slaves. Image by angipants via Canva Pro

1) Build upon existing strengths

- Data suggests that Mauritius excels at balancing a respect for difference with an overarching united identity. Events which bring all Mauritians together such as the Indian Ocean Games around a common cause have shown to be particularly effective in the past, and should continue into the future.
- The cross-cutting ties in neighborhoods, schools, and informal institutions should be deeply valued and protected, as avoiding segregation and building strong relationships across groups has helped build and maintain peace within Mauritius.
- Norms and laws which protect and value multiculturalism should continue to be celebrated. The appreciation and respect for difference that is so potent in Mauritius has paved the way for peace within the diversity of the country.

2) Address inequities

- Many of the current inequities reflect past systems of oppression. A review of extant colonial structures should be put in place and gradually replaced by fairer and more appropriate mechanisms so that the groups which continue to be disenfranchised by these can hope to emancipate themselves from persistent exclusion.
- The Truth and Justice Commission and Equal Opportunity Commission, and greater access to education in response to riots as measures are welcomed but participants consider that the

recommendations of the different commissions need to be implemented.

- Creole participants advocated recognition through institutional means through the support of national and global institutions. Additionally, platforms which would allow marginalized groups such as Creoles, LGBT and women to address issues of inequity and stigmatization were suggested.
- Ultimately, wider and targeted opportunities and access should be made available to people in underprivileged pockets.

3) Develop more transparent and responsive public systems

- Regulatory mechanisms should be put in place to monitor and stem corruption and cronyism in politics.
- Electoral reform to tackle gerrymandering would help to promote a fairer sense of representation of different sections of the population.
- Greater transparency mechanisms particularly in relation to the outer Islands development was proposed.
- The quality of public services should be enhanced so that poorer people in particular are not mired in bureaucratic backlogs. Support systems should be set up at local levels to facilitate those who are struggling economically to access and benefit from services more readily.
- An inventory of defective public utilities should be carried out so that these can be upgraded and poorer people no longer have to struggle on a daily basis to access basic services.

4) Ensure a holistic and inclusive approach in decision-making processes

- Institutional bodies should engage with young people as well as the wider population who are invested in developing and implementing a sustainable environmental agenda. A strong sense of collective custodianship of the natural beauties of the island already exists and needs to be supported through concrete plans.
- Communication and synergy between NGOs, institutions and the private sector would enable better identification, implementation and monitoring of social and economic goals.
- Economic development must be complemented with social, cultural and environmental blueprints which focus on the well-being of the population with respect to health, family and leisure.

5) Continue to develop skills and platforms for addressing tensions

- Participants identified certain key political and religious leaders as critical to maintaining peace. Additionally, informal neighborhood peacekeepers were identified as useful resources for addressing conflicts as they arise. These strengths could be built upon by

developing and providing resources for existing local level conflict resolution platforms since ties among neighbors are already strong to avert conflict at micro-levels and prevent them from escalating. There should be greater cooperation between local, regional and national bodies in addressing differences and conflicts.

- Peace education should be included within the curriculum so that children are sensitized to conflict resolution strategies at a young age. The promotion of difference in schools should be expanded to incorporate common civic projects.
- Women should be empowered to play a greater role and bring greater contribution to the maintenance and sustainability of peace. Their cultivation of mediation and their experiences of conflict resolution should be drawn upon and valued.
- Public spaces of discussion which are respectful of freedom of expression should be set up at different scales-from educational bodies to municipalities, in the media and at the level of institutions so that people can safely engage in conversations and avoid the sense that tensions are suppressed rather than worked through. Additionally, because people generally trust and respect institutional bodies for procedural and distributive justice, these institutions seem particularly well placed to help open avenues for public discussions.

6) Foster shared and accurate historical accounts

- Shared, accurate and collective memories of national history should be crafted, moving away from fragmented and sanitized memorialization of the nation's history.
- A repertoire of the oral traditions of different cultures which recount the stories of solidarity and friendship within the population should be recorded, preserved and disseminated.
- Many described how transmitting wisdom through formal education, the media, the internet, museums, and storytelling has helped open minds, reduce prejudice, and ensure that the harms of the past are not repeated in the future. The importance of maintaining these important traditions and mechanisms for knowledge sharing should continue to be celebrated.

Image of Chamarel Seven Coloured Earth Geopark by Konstik via CanvaPro



CONCLUSION

Mauritius is on the brink of change and there is a feeling that the status quo cannot persist, but there seems to be a hesitancy around the process through which these changes may occur.

There are difficult conversations to be had. One of the interrogations which recurred was about the best ways in which to open spaces, and reach out to people who are having different experiences, who cannot connect, and who cannot hear each other, or would not speak to one another about challenges out of a fear that these conversations might cause some break down of the peace.

In past instances, when the keepers of the peace got involved in these difficult situations, it helped the peace and did not fracture it.

Since the focus groups and interviews were conducted, several participants have spoken about how refreshing it was to participate in these focus groups and have these conversations. A desire for a space for these conversations to continue into the future was palpable.

Image of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens by bennymarty via CanvaPro

